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## Book Review: Icelanders in North America: The First Settlers

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*Icelanders in North America: The First Settlers.*  
By Jonas Thor. Winnipeg: University of  
Manitoba Press, 2002. 306 pp. Photographs,  
maps, figures, appendix, notes, bibliography,  
index. C\$19.95.

Jonas Thor's study offers an excellent view into the background and development of Icelandic migration to the West, briefly outlining immigration to Utah in the 1850s and Brazil in the 1860-70s, but primarily focusing on mass migration from 1870 to 1914 to and within the North American prairies, and gravitating to the west coast.

Thor outlines the climatic, demographic, geological, social, and political factors that explain why a sizable portion of the Icelandic

population was eventually swept into the stream of mass migration to the West. But his central concern is to analyze and assess the reasons for the success or failure of each settlement, critiquing the aim that shaped Icelandic settlement history through the 1870s, which was to set up a separate colony where Icelanders could maintain their language, culture, and customs.

Thor explains that the migrants felt driven to demonstrate that their departure during Iceland's battle for independence from Denmark did not entail a rejection of their heritage, and that cultural retention seemed viable because the nation was so small and heterogeneous it was "like one big family." Moreover, many early leaders believed that adjustment to North America would best be accommodated in an exclusively Icelandic colony. Thor asserts that "It mattered almost as much to many of the migrants to be able to speak their mother tongue and maintain Icelandic traditions and culture, as to create a better life for themselves."

According to Thor, the dream of a separate colony had been fulfilled with the establishment of New Iceland in 1875 (later joined with Manitoba), but was discarded as being impractical already by the end of the 1870s. Depicting the distinctive cultural and economic development of each settlement, he argues that success in terms of survival and cultural integration was better secured in mixed settlements where more established ethnic groups—commonly other Scandinavians—could teach the Icelanders at the outset how to manage in the utterly unfamiliar environment.

This first comprehensive overview available in English can without hesitation be recommended to all those interested in migration studies or the history of Icelanders in North America. Although Icelandic immigrants took great pains to record their settlement history, it has been largely inaccessible. The most substantial overview, prior to Thor's, is in Icelandic. Additional material, in English, gathered here by Thor into a coherent and readable

account, comes from regional and family histories, newspaper and periodical articles, diaries and letters, some appearing in print for the first time.

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